

"Reconstructing Afghanistan: Freedom In Crisis": Senator Chuck Hagel Testimony

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CHAIRPERSON GAER: Thank you very much, Dr. Natsios.

I'm very pleased to introduce Senator Chuck Hagel, who is now joining us. Chuck Hagel is the senior Senator from Nebraska, and he sits on five committees in the United States Senate--the Foreign Relations Committee; Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs; Energy and Natural Resources and Budget; and Aging.

Among his recent accomplishments is the successful passage of the Afghanistan Freedom Support Act, for which he was the Senate sponsor. The Afghan Freedom Support Act of 2002 was signed by President Bush on December 4, 2002. It authorizes \$3.3 billion in economic development, humanitarian and security assistance in Afghanistan.

The bill affirms that assistance to Afghanistan should, among other things, and I quote, "Foster the growth of a pluralistic society that promotes and respects religious freedom," in schools, the Constitution, through civil society, military and police training, and in the justice sector.

Prior to his election to the Senate, Mr. Hagel was president of a privately owned investment-banking firm in Omaha, Nebraska. He is a Vietnam combat veteran, and former Deputy Administrator of the Veterans Administration. We are delighted to introduce Senator Chuck Hagel.

SENATOR HAGEL: Thank you very much.

Of course, Andrew has no future. He's leaving before my speech.

[Laughter.]

SENATOR

HAGEL: It's kind of a dull group, isn't it. They don't get this. Especially because I was going to say nice things about Natsios, and it doesn't often happen for him in the job he has, and I just saw Zal leave on his way back to do important things for our country. That's a good starting point, after I thank you all for what you are doing, what you continue to do. We are grateful for your leadership and your efforts, and so many of you here in the audience who have committed yourselves over the years to these great causes--causes far greater than your own self-interests, and we appreciate that.

My job as a policymaker is to contribute where I can and essentially stay out of your way and try to make your life a little easier by providing resources and some framework to work within.

I want to acknowledge the good work of Andrew Natsios and the AID people, some are here also, my friend Zal, who has had difficulty holding jobs.

[Laughter.]

SENATOR

HAGEL: You know he changes portfolios annually. That actually is a pretty good sign that he's doing good work. The President has significant confidence in him, as we all do, and I want to acknowledge what he is doing and the people associated with him.

Now, we have dispensed with the pleasantries of the day, and we will get to work. You all have a busy schedule today, and I won't trespass on that schedule and drone on like Senators normally do, although that's part of our contract. Being a Senator, you can just say as much as you like,

as much nonsense as you like, and you're never held accountable really. You don't have a real job.

But let me make a couple of comments about at least the framework in which we are trying to deal with some of these great challenges of our time. I thought the President's speech last night impressed upon all of us once again, including the world, the importance of human rights, of dignity, religious freedoms, the dynamics of who we are as a free people and the contributions free people have made and continue to make.

And as the President said it, I thought rather well, we are a country. Not only the United States has contributed and will continue to contribute to freedom, but we have a tradition, a history, a heritage, a legacy that we're very proud of in this country, and that is to enhance human dignity and liberty across the globe, and I think we have been called upon to not only sustain that, but initiate that over the last 200 years of the history of our country. We're very proud of that because everything begins with the human being. The freedom, the respect, the dignity of what each human being should be accorded in the world, regardless of what you believe - and tolerance is a big part of that. And how do we do that? What is the best way to assure that not only that dignity comes, but we preserve it, and we enhance it?

Well, no perfect answers. I certainly am incapable of saying anything profound or giving you a perfect answer, but my 56 years of living, and I've seen a little bit, my reading of history and my paying attention occasionally tells me that it is democratic institutions that is our best hope to assure that human freedom.

That means that we put in place the fundamentals of democratic institutions where we can. We can't dominate. We don't wish to dominate. I don't believe--I am only speaking for this United States Senator--that the United States should go around the world and stamp out cookie-cutter mini U.S.A.s. That's up to the people of Afghanistan or wherever else we are attempting to assist. That's their role. They need to sort that out.

But where we can help, and much of what the bill that I sponsored is about, is to assist the people of Afghanistan in development of those democratic institutions. That, of course, includes many specific programs, starting with respect and tolerance for men and women. Boys and girls should have equal opportunity to attend schools - religious tolerance, all that encompasses freedom, and it is framed and structured within democratic institutions. That is why a number of us pushed hard last year to construct a piece of legislation that we

thought would help do that.

When we talk of security and stability in the world, as the President did last night, I have been one who has believed for a long time, long before September 11th of 2001, that it is not just great military might that protects a nation or sustains liberty, but it is also the humanitarian, it is the educational, it's the trade, the environmental, all the common dynamics of nations, of peoples, common denominators of what's most important in people's lives.

And the military component is important--of course, it's important. We have a significant military component in Afghanistan, the United States, as well as allies, and it is there to assist the Afghan people in assuring some sense of security and stability that the Afghan people can develop their own government, can develop their own educational institutions, develop their own army, develop their own police force and ensure, as much as we can--as much as we can--that the people of Afghanistan have a chance, have an opportunity to make a better life, and that's what the bill is about.

What Andrew Natsios talked about is a component of that. Obviously, market systems, economic opportunity are all part of that, jobs. They all fit together, and we must see it in the larger context of the big picture, not just one or two or three pieces, but all of it.

And, again, when we looked at constructing that legislation last year, we took into account all of those components. And those of you who are very familiar with this bill, and the Commissioners surely are, you will note, and I know Natsios talks about some of it, an economic component, a security component, a women's rights component, educational components. We have enterprise zone components, and that is as it should be, as it must be, in order to deal with all of the pieces that must come together in some sense of organization and commitment.

This is not easy. Those of you who are far more familiar with the challenges in Afghanistan than I understand this better than most of us. I see my friend Peter Tomsen here, who has made invaluable contributions to not just those of us on Capitol Hill and in the Administration, but to the people of Afghanistan, to the people of the world to try to better understand what are the challenges, and then what are the solutions, how best we can use this great power that the United States possesses to assist the people of Afghanistan - and Peter Tomsen has done that remarkably well, as well as anybody I know of.

I might also say we take some pride in Nebraska for Tomsen, since he has served as an adjunct professor at the University of Nebraska in Omaha. He was smart before he came to us, but we've enhanced that intelligence since he's been out in the prairie, and as you probably know, he's writing a book and we're proud of him.

I am here really to thank you all for what you're doing and continue to do, let you know that we will continue to do more. We are committed, we must be committed. Afghanistan, among all of the other issues, among all of the other questions and tests, is the real first test case of how the civilized world is going to deal with terrorism, and it is bigger than just the threat of an isolated incident or two of terrorism.

We must get underneath causes of terrorism, and we must connect despair, and hopelessness, and poverty, and hunger with some of the outcome and consequences--radicalism, fundamentalism--and for my country that means anti-American attitudes.

We must shift our perspectives, we must reverse the optics and try to understand how the rest of the world sees us, as well as how we see the rest of the world. I think we are doing that. We have a long way to go. We need your help.

So, again, I thank you, and if I have any time left, I'd be glad to entertain a question or any advice.

CHAIRPERSON GAER: We have time for one short question.

SENATOR HAGEL: I'll keep my answers short. You were very generous not to say that, but I will--

CHAIRPERSON GAER: And we'd be happy to have one from the audience, if there's anybody who would like to ask.

There's a lady on the side, and they're bringing a microphone around. Would you just indicate your name and then your question.

ELISE LABBOTT: Elise Labbott from CNN. Thank you, Senator.

We see the fiscal reconstruction on track, but we talk to a lot of Afghans, and there seems to be a lot of political alienation, a lot of people feel they were left out of the Loya Jirga and that there's a lot of ethnic strife between various groups that's bubbling under the surface, and that this is really what threatens the long-term reconstruction of the country.

And if you wouldn't mind, with everything going on with Iraq right now, could you draw a parallel to the challenges that lie ahead for a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq and whether you see we can take any lessons from this.

Thank you.

SENATOR

HAGEL: Well, I think your point is a good one, and it's instructive. Sure, there are parallels to Iraq, different situations, different dynamics, as there always are, and that's the tough part of foreign policy. There are no perfect answers. There are no exact solutions. Every situation is a little different. That's why America must be very wise, and steady, and cautious in how we exercise our power and how we work with our allies.

I have, as some of you may know, been a proponent of the United States staying within the boundaries of the United Nations' efforts in Iraq, working through the Security Council, through the inspections. It is the enhancement of America's relationships that will dictate the future for America. We can't go it alone, for a lot of reasons.

But to your point, and I respond with what I've just said to make somewhat of a point and to answer what you said, there's no question that, as I just said five minutes ago, that Iraq is the first real test case in how we are going to deal with terrorism, and if we fail in--or Afghanistan--and if we fail in Afghanistan, if we let the people of Afghanistan down, it will reverberate out across the world in a very bad way, not just for the people of Central Asia and Afghanistan, but it will send a message clearly across the globe that you cannot count on America's word, you cannot count on our commitment, and you risk, at your peril, associating with the United States of America.

We talk in glowing, noble terms, but in fact we cannot sustain and fulfill our commitments. If that would be the case--I don't think it will be the case--we are there for the long term, and we must be there for the long term, as will be the case in Iraq, and that has been a part of the debate on Iraq. That is why one of the reasons I have said we need allies, we need friends. Whatever happens in Iraq, whatever the ultimate decision may be, we can't do it alone. Because once Saddam Hussein is gone, if he is gone, someone must govern.

I don't buy into any of this debate that says, well, if you just get rid of Saddam Hussein, it'll all change, everything will be better. The peace process in Israel goes through Baghdad, and all of the problems in the Middle East go through Baghdad. I don't agree with that, but a lot of people do think that's right.

The same in Afghanistan. There is no one component answer to any of this. So there are parallels that we can learn from, and adjust to, and deal with as we work our way through Afghanistan, with our friends, with our allies, that certainly I believe can be applicable to an ultimate resolution in Iraq to allow the people of Iraq to begin to enjoy at some point the same kinds of new opportunities, freedoms, that we are trying to help the Afghani people with.

That's a long-term commitment, and America must understand, if we're going to go around the world and make these noble pronouncements, that we are in for a long time. That's resources, that's leadership, that's money, that's men, and our word and our commitment.

That wasn't a very short answer, but it was a good question that needed, at least I thought, a longer answer, and I'm incapable of giving short answers.

So, Madam Chairman, without suffering your wrath here, I will get off the stage and allow you to do your thing.

Thank you very much.